

### Quilting Party

1980–81

Acrylic on commercially gessoed canvas

84" x 252"

Location: Houston Music Hall (currently on loan to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston)<sup>20</sup>

FIG. 16.1

## 16. QUILTING PARTY

*Quilting Party* [Fig. 16.1] is based on my remembrance of my mother and aunts stitching a quilt. They would take our old clothing and transform it into these beautifully made quilts....And that is what I try to do with my work—take our past lives and try to weave it into something new.<sup>15</sup>

In the early 1950s, Susan McAshan, the Houston art patron who had been influential in John Biggers' coming to Texas Southern, had proposed to the Houston city council that John Biggers and his colleague Carroll Simms create a mural and a sculpture for the city. The city council rejected the idea. McAshan again made the proposal to the city council in the late '70s, and this time the city commissioned a Biggers mural and a Simms sculpture for the Houston Music Hall. *Quilting Party* was created for the main lobby of the Music Hall. Susan and Maurice McAshan donated the mural to the city of Houston. They have done so much for the art department at Texas Southern.<sup>16</sup>

The mood of *Quilting Party* is one of celebration and great joy. Like a party, it is filled with people and activity: one can almost hear the sounds of the music. As Biggers discusses this mural, he compares the pulsating beat of gospel music and jazz to the visual effect that he was after in the work. He speaks of his early love of gospel music: *On Saturday and Sunday, music was our recreation. Every Sunday morning a radio program called "Wings Over Jordan" came on at 10:30. The whole family loved that music, so we'd sit listening until the very last minute, and then rush off to church. We were always late.*<sup>17</sup>

During his visit to Africa, Biggers had opportunities to hear and see a variety of musical instruments. He was particularly interested in the xylophone. *African xylophones*

*have different forms in different regions. The gourd is a part of the instrument. The straight instrument has attached long straight gourds, while the curved ones have very rounded gourd forms. Each one has a different sound. I did get to bang on them, but couldn't make music, as musicians do. The sound of B.B. King on the guitar is like the sound of the xylophone.*<sup>18</sup>

In this intense and exuberant composition, African xylophones called balaphons form sky-borne bridges that link earthly celebrations with the heavens [Fig. 16.2, p. 53]—suggesting the power of music to transport the spirit, truly "wings over Jordan."

The centerpiece of the mural is a large circular form that Biggers calls the morning star. *The queen of heaven is the morning star. She is seen from the back, facing inward so that we understand her as a sculptural form. Her plaited hair forms ears, as the "dog star." She is the guardian, like the great tree of life, with the serpent in it. This star is a reference point in the heavens for travellers. I have made many drawings of her from an African piece that I own* [Figs. 16.4, 16.5, p. 52].

*To the far right is the evening star, with grandma, grandpa and grandchildren* [Fig. 16.3, p. 53]. *To the immediate right are the three kings, African tribal chiefs. To the far left is a young couple with a child, and on the immediate right, three Marys with looms are making a quilt pattern. Field laborers, hunched over, are at work under the xylophone.*<sup>19</sup>

The festive figures situated on the rich brown earth—the kings with their large umbrellas, the dancing women—are derived from *Ananse*, John Biggers' 1962 book of drawings from Africa. The pecking hens and flying crows are reminiscent of the rural farmyard in *Family Unity*, but sug-



gest upward movement as well.

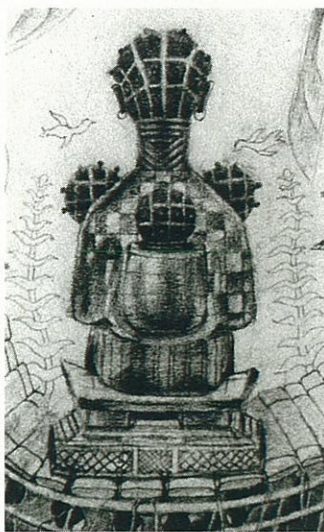
Creeping onto the scene is a new creature, the turtle. In the legend of the tortoise and the hare, a story both African and American, the slower, steadier tortoise wins the race against the faster hare. Biggers, however, had begun to invest his own meaning into this humble creature: *The turtle, in some African stories, represents the sun, the source of all energy. It also reminds us of living waters: ponds, lakes and oceans, the source of life itself.*<sup>21</sup>

Although the colors of *Quilting Party* are still earth tones—black, umber and sienna, accented with bright golds, creams and yellows—the mood is more that of a carnival at night. The composition of the mural is symmetrical, with color and light placed to direct the eye to the triple focal points of the morning star, evening star and family unit. Here, Biggers is leaving behind the guidelines of Viktor Lowenfeld and Diego Rivera. Although there is still a requisite shallowness to the spatial imagery, the work takes on an aerial perspective, as though the viewer were no longer earth-bound. Biggers' linear regularity has given way to a swirling feel of motion.

Underlying the entire work is a new structural element. The quilt pattern has become a grid, with images woven in, which serves to unify the complex mural. The quilt with the star pattern in the far right corner



**Dog Star**  
African sculpture in the artist's collection  
FIG. 16.4



**Dog Star**  
Drawing by the artist  
PRIVATE COLLECTION  
FIG. 16.5

has the distinctive look of an early American quilt, while the triangular motif elsewhere is common throughout Africa on textiles, carvings and metal work. In later murals, John Biggers would begin with a quilt pattern and build upon that structure.

*Quilting Party* is the first Biggers mural to be painted entirely with acrylic paint on a commercially prepared gessoed canvas [Fig. 16.6].<sup>22</sup> Using thin water and acrylic washes, Biggers achieved a luminous transparency with the acrylic paint that is difficult to distinguish from oil glazing.

*I was beginning to experiment with oil overglazes in my easel paintings, but I liked the matte quality of the acrylic and water washes for the mural. I never did use that polymer medium. I liked water. When I finished the painting, I mixed a tiny bit of umber color into flat damar varnish, and over-painted the whole canvas with that mixture. That toned it down and gave a unity which brought everything together.*<sup>23</sup>

In 1983, Biggers was named a recipient of the Creativity Award sponsored by the Texas Arts Alliance and the Texas Commission on the Arts. He was cited "for his accomplishments as one of America's major black artists and specifically for the completion in 1981 of the major mural for the Houston Music Hall, the *Quilting Party*."<sup>24</sup>



*The artist  
at work*  
FIG. 16.6